

Brigade 2506: Young, Idealistic, and anti-Castro

A Seniors Honors Thesis

Presented in Fulfillment of the Requirements for graduation  
with distinction in History in the undergraduate colleges of  
The Ohio State University

by

Brian E. Campbell

The Ohio State University  
2011

Project Advisors: Dr. Stanley E. Blake  
Dr. Allison B. Gilmore

Recently, PBS aired a short program commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Bay of Pigs Invasion. When talking about the invasion, the commentator spoke mostly about President Kennedy's decision to attack Cuba and the political fallout that ensued. I listened intently to the commentator, expecting to hear the word "exiles." To my amazement, the commentator limited his description of Bay of Pigs soldiers to "a group of men." The commentator was accurate, indeed, the Bay of Pigs soldiers were all men, but they were also Cuban. The audience is left to speculate about these "men," assuming perhaps that the Bay of Pigs was solely a United States' military operation. While the CIA organized and funded the operation, the participants were not United States' soldiers or American mercenaries. Cuban exiles were responsible for carrying out the amphibious assault at the Bay of Pigs. On April 17, 1961, nearly 1,300 Cuban exiles and a handful of CIA operatives invaded Cuba with the objective of overthrowing Fidel Castro and establishing their brand of democracy in Cuba. The Bay of Pigs Invasion is one of the more scrutinized events in twentieth century history. The secrecy surrounding the invasion, including the Kennedy administration's initial refusal to acknowledge U.S. participation in the operation has led many BOP scholars to focus on the political fallout. Bay of Pigs research tends to focus on the United States' involvement and largely ignores the Cuban exiles' perspective. Yet in order to fully understand the Bay of Pigs Invasion the exiles' perspective must be analyzed and connected to the White House's involvement.

Immediately after the invasion, Fidel Castro labeled the Cuban exiles as mercenaries. This description implies that they participated for monetary incentive rather than ideological reasons. In reality, the exiles were not mercenaries, they were not paid as mercenaries and their motivations were not monetary but ideological. Without understanding the background behind the invasion, it would seem as if the CIA had trained these men to carry out a military operation for the United

States government. It is true that the U.S. was actively seeking a way to oust Castro from power thus eliminating a perceived communist threat in the Western Hemisphere. However, for the Cuban exiles of Brigade 2506, the invasion was their war, it was a way to return to Cuba and shape the Cuban government as they saw fit. Exiles knew that support from the U.S. and the CIA was necessary to carry out the military invasion. While they viewed the operation as Cuban, they depended on assistance in the form of military aid and training from the CIA. A relationship between exiles and the U.S. surely existed but each entity used one another to achieve similar but different objectives. Exiles used the military aid and training in their attempt to overthrow a leader who they believed was destroying Cuban way of life. The United States used the exiles to achieve a political goal, to remove a communist threat ninety miles away from Miami.

An examination of the social, political, racial, and religious backgrounds of Brigade 2506 is necessary to succinctly understand exile motivation in the Bay of Pigs invasion. Factors such as age, racial makeup, political affiliations before the Revolution, profession, and education can be analyzed to determine reasons for participation. After careful analysis of statistics and first-hand accounts, Brigade 2506 was a racially integrated unit, predominantly Catholic, overwhelmingly young, and mostly from the middle to upper classes of Cuban society. Records from the Bay of Pigs Association in Miami reveal an almost equal number of married and non-married participants and no single occupation dominated among the soldiers. A significant number of students, military personnel, and general employees participated in the invasion but none of these occupations stands out more than the others. What can be inferred is that Brigade 2506 was relatively young and idealistic, wanting to participate in the reshaping of post-Revolutionary Cuba in response to Castro's communist rhetoric. For many of these soldiers, the Revolution would not benefit them personally as it did for poverty-stricken Cubans. Bay of Pigs scholar, Victor Triay

argues that the brigade was racially mixed and represented a cross-section of Cuban society. Triay writes “The approximately 1,700 men who ultimately passed through the Frente’s offices and joined the Brigade represented a cross-section of Cuba.”<sup>1</sup> I argue that not enough Afro-Cubans, poor, and uneducated soldiers were involved to label the brigade as a true cross-section of Cuban society. A mercenary does not fight for ideals but rather monetary gain. In the case of Brigade 2506, ideals were most important to a group of young soldiers wanting to topple Castro’s communist government. The appeal and adventure that war offers and the ability to change Cuba’s political discourse motivated these young exiles to volunteer for the invasion. I argue that soldiers in Brigade 2506 were from the middle and upper classes of Cuban society, mostly white, idealistic, anti-Castro and would not have benefitted from socialist reforms after the Cuban Revolution. Their anti-communist ideology was fueled by a perceived threat to their way of life in Cuba. They viewed the United States as bulwarks of communism worldwide and naturally agreed to work alongside the CIA for this reason.

The invasion was not originally planned to be a conventional assault but rather a guerrilla operation. The CIA operatives in Guatemala notified the soldiers shortly before the invasion that they would be conducting conventional warfare. The original plan called for seizure of a small town near the Escambray Mountains but plans changed quickly and leadership opted for the conventional assault at the Bay of Pigs.<sup>2</sup> Numbers vary as to the actual number of participants in the battle. CIA operative Grayston Lynch, who trained exiles and joined the brigade during the

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Triay, *Bay of Pigs: an Oral History of Brigade 2506* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001), 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Mario Abril. Interview by Brian Campbell, February 16, 2011, pg. 8, transcript.

assault, estimates that nearly 1,500 exiles were members of the Brigade.<sup>3</sup> Historian Victor Triay asserts that 1,300 exiles actually participated in the battle and that nearly 1,180 were taken prisoner.<sup>4</sup> Triay's numbers are consistent with the Association's database, when narrowed down from 3,215 names, includes nearly 1,300 brigade members.<sup>5</sup> A reasonable number for the actual invading force is most likely between 1,300 and 1,400 soldiers. If Triay's prisoner to participant ratio is correct then nearly 120 exiles were killed or unaccounted for after the invasion.

The battle was a monumental defeat for the Cuban exiles who anticipated more assistance from the United States. Veterans felt a sense of betrayal on the part of the Kennedy administration for not supplying air power. Lack of resources played a significant role in the defeat as there were not enough supplies to sustain an extended military campaign. But the sheer fact that the brigade force included close to 1,500 soldiers put it at an extreme disadvantage in the first place. Perhaps the decision to wage a conventional battle was the fundamental mistake made by decision makers. The original plan for a guerilla assault could have been more effective given that the United States was unwilling to provide necessary air support and that the exiles lacked supplies such as ammunition. Not everyone in the White House agreed with the decision as Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Mann reported his concerns about the invasion to Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Mann argued that the plan was closer to being a military invasion than a covert

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<sup>3</sup> Grayston Lynch, *Decision for Disaster* (London: Brassey's, 1998), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Triay, *Bay of Pigs: an Oral History of Brigade 2506*, 115.

<sup>5</sup> Database provided by Dr. Mario Abril. The list was likely compiled by former Bay of Pigs veterans at the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association in Miami, Fl. The data is displayed in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The List was narrowed down from 3,200 names to 1,266 based on information provided for occupation, birthplace, age, and listed brigade number.

operation and stated that an invasion could attract more support for Castro.<sup>6</sup> The assumption by CIA intelligence was that the attack could initiate a popular, counter-revolutionary uprising in the countryside. The internal CIA investigation concluded that the failure to create enough resistance within Cuba played a role in the defeat.<sup>7</sup> The investigation also emphasized two false assumptions that CIA leaders had made. One, that Castro was too weak to fend off an invasion and two that the CIA assumed that Kennedy would send in the Marines if the invasion failed.<sup>8</sup>

After analyzing these government documents, it is easy to assume that the United States was the major player in the invasion. The U.S. used Cuban exiles as a diversion in order to deflect attention away from the United States. The Kennedy administration wanted to create the impression that this was an independent Cuban operation and that these exiles acted alone. Although they understood who was funding their operation, the exiles truly saw the invasion as their own. When asked about being an extension of the U.S. military, Dr. Mario Abril, a Brigade 2506 veteran and current professor of Music at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga responded, “No, we thought of ourselves as independent.”<sup>9</sup> The end result had varying outcomes for the parties involved. For John F. Kennedy, the decision to launch an attack became a stain on his presidential record and intensified animosity between Cuba and the United States. For the Cuban exiles, the defeat was far more personal, especially for those taken prisoner or killed. A

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas C. Mann. “Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs (Mann) to Secretary of State Rusk, February 15, 1961. (Arguing against invasion an invasion of Cuba).” Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Countries Series, Cuba, General 1/61-4/61. Top Secret; Eyes Only. <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/baypig5.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Warner. “The CIA’s Internal Probe of the Bay of Pigs Affair.” Central Intelligence Agency, Washington D.C. Center for the Study of Intelligence 40, no.2 (1996): *National Security Archive*, (Nov. 4, 2010), 72.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>9</sup> Mario Abril, Interview by Brian Campbell, February 16, 2011, pg. 6, transcript.

social and ideological analysis of the Brigade sheds light on exile participation. The simple explanation that the brigade was anti-communist is not a sufficient answer to the motivation question. Examining why the brigade was anti-communist in the first place helps understand their motivations for participating in the invasion.

The decision to train a Cuban exile force initially began under Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidency and carried over into the Kennedy administration. Brigade recruitment centers were established in Miami where Cubans could volunteer to join the CIA funded unit. Abril explained that one such center was located on 27<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Miami and Cubans could enter the office and ask to be sent to the training camps in Central America.<sup>10</sup> There seemed to be some ambiguity regarding the exact location of the training camps, it was only stated that they were being conducted somewhere in Central America.<sup>11</sup> Abril was previously a member of a group called the Student Directorate whose mission was to infiltrate Cuba in a "piecemeal way" but when hearing about the creation of a Cuban brigade, Abril decided that a united effort to overthrow Castro would be more effective.<sup>12</sup> Abril and other brigade members soon realized that the training camps were located in Guatemala. The CIA was in charge of training the exiles and as more recruits entered Guatemala, Brigade 2506 soon became a legitimate military force.

Guatemala served as the training ground for the exiles most likely because of its proximity to Cuba and the fact that the Guatemalan government was friendly to the United States. In 1954, an exile force similar to Brigade 2506 invaded Guatemala and overthrew President Jacobo Arbenz's government. Arbenz was not explicitly a communist but he appointed communists in

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<sup>10</sup> Mario Abril. Interview by Brian Campbell, February 4, 2011, pg. 3, transcript.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Dr. Abril Interview, February, 16, 2001, pg. 7.

his government and also legitimized the communist leaning Guatemalan Labor Party or PGT.<sup>13</sup> The United States responded to a perceived communist threat in their sphere of influence. The U.S. believed that Arbenz could nationalize the powerful United Fruit Company and took action to assure itself that a communist leaning government would not occupy Central America. While training in Guatemala, the Cuban exile force was asked to put down a Guatemalan rebellion whose insurgents were upset about the brigade's training in their country.<sup>14</sup> After the Guatemalan revolt, CIA officials discussed moving the training camp to Saipan but as 1961 approached, more exiles arrived at the training camp; this would be their last destination before embarking to Cuba.<sup>15</sup>

After the success of the coup in 1954, the United States could rely on a pro-democratic government in Guatemala. The Guatemalan government allowed the CIA to train the exiles in the Guatemalan countryside. The United States military became directly involved with the Cuban-training operation in Guatemala when the Green Berets were called upon to turn Camp Base Trax into a "disciplined military installation."<sup>16</sup> The fact that the CIA would use a world-renowned military force such as the Green Berets reveals the seriousness placed upon exile training. Many soldiers had military experience but others were civilians who had to undergo rigorous training in preparation for an invasion. This was not a ragtag group of rebels who were sent blindly into Cuba, after training, they were a skilled group of fighters capable of waging war. The dense jungle in Guatemala proved to be an obstacle during training. Carlos (Carlyle)

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Kinzer and Stephen C. Schlesinger, *Bitter Fruit: the Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (Cambridge: Harvard University, David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, 1999), 58.

<sup>14</sup> Piero Gleijeses. "Ships in the Night: The CIA, the White House and the Bay of Pigs," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 27, no. 1 (1995), 15-16.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>16</sup> Lynch, *Decision for Disaster*, 24.



Rodriguez Santana and a handful of other soldiers were navigating through the jungle when Santana fell to his death as he attempted to climb a ledge.<sup>17</sup> When the soldiers contemplated naming the brigade, they wanted to honor Santana. Some preferred the name “Carlyle Brigade,” Santana’s nickname, but in the end, they decided on Brigade 2506.<sup>18</sup> This moment could have been the culmination for the soldiers, by honoring their friend and naming their unit, they solidified themselves as a legitimate fighting force.

The first half of this paper will focus on race, religion, age, occupation, education, and political affiliations before the Revolution in order to understand the brigade’s social and ideological structure. The second half of the paper will examine the relationship between the brigade, CIA, and Kennedy administration and also address issues pertaining to imprisonment, nationalism, and the idea of the brigade as a mercenary unit. The overall goal is to understand the reasons for the Brigade’s anti-communist ideology and how it plays into their reason for participating in a U.S. sponsored invasion.

### **Race**

Although the Brigade was racially integrated most of the soldiers were considered white. Fifty Afro-Cubans were brigade members; the others were racially mixed or white.<sup>19</sup> Triay asserts that the majority of soldiers were white.<sup>20</sup> Nearly sixty to seventy percent of Cubans are

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<sup>17</sup> Haynes Johnson, *The Bay of Pigs: The Leaders’ Story of Brigade 2506* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1964), 47.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>19</sup> Triay, *An Oral History of Brigade 2506*, 14.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

considered black or mixed.<sup>21</sup> This statistic reveals contemporary population statistics but can be considered indicative of Cuban racial numbers in the late 1950s. Because Afro-Cubans and those of mixed descent make up the majority of the racial population, it is difficult to argue that the Brigade was a microcosm of Cuban society at the time. Cuba, like many Caribbean nations, had a significant number of descendents of African slaves living in the country. One cannot describe the Brigade as entirely “white” but most of the men were in fact not Afro-Cuban. According to many veterans, race was not an issue within the brigade. Leadership roles were not confined to whites and the brigade was open and integrated to both white and black. A reason for the disproportionate number of Afro-Cubans to whites may be explained through promises made during Castro’s Revolution. Castro’s Revolution purported to narrow the gap between rich and poor, ultimately eliminating poverty entirely. Through this process racial equality could be established. Racial equality became one of the main rallying points for the Revolution. The lack of Afro-Cubans in Brigade 2506 could be attributed to the Revolution’s attitude towards equality and bettering the lives of Afro-Cubans. In other words, because Castro intended to address racial inequality, fewer Afro-Cubans would be willing to fight against the Revolution.

Mario Abril reflected on the racial situation in Brigade 2506 and believed, like many other soldiers, that race was not an issue of contention within the Brigade. When asked to comment on the general social makeup of the Brigade, Abril said “They were black, they were white, they were brown, you name it.”<sup>22</sup> This comment clearly reveals that the Brigade was racially integrated but the extent of its mixture was limited. There is no evidence to suggest racial inequality within the Brigade. That does not mean that instances of racism did not occur but it seems that those

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<sup>21</sup> Eugene Robinson, “Cuba Begins to Answer its Race Question,” *The Washington Post* (Washington, D.C.), November 12, 2000, Pg. A01.

<sup>22</sup> Dr. Abril Interview, February 4, 2011, 1.

involved in the invasion firmly believe that race was not a contentious issue. When discussing race, other veterans insist on this very argument and seem to feel a sense of pride in this matter.

Grayston Lynch, the CIA operative who actually fought alongside with the brigade, also mentioned the issue of race. Like Abril, Lynch commented that the brigade included “whites, blacks, and mulattos.”<sup>23</sup> Lynch’s comment “2506 was not race-conscious or prejudice,” describes the racial issue better than any other statement. Although he did not write at length about race, this statement was clearly intended to illicit an immediate reaction. He points to the fact that Oliva was Afro-Cuban and became perhaps one of the most well respected leaders of Brigade 2506.<sup>24</sup> Lynch was not just an outside observer but an actual participant in the invasion. He became a critic of the Kennedy administration after the war and felt that the exiles had been betrayed at the Bay of Pigs. Lynch even hints to the prospect that Kennedy created the invasion force first and foremost to rid the United States of the politically motivated exiles.<sup>25</sup> Lynch is determined to retell the correct version (in his opinion) of the invasion and its participants. The prospect that racial equality was more fact than narrative is confirmed by Lynch and his devotion to retelling the correct version of the Bay of Pigs. Lynch makes no mention to the number of blacks and racially mixed soldiers but is adamant that racial equality existed.

Sergio Carrillo, an Afro-Cuban paratrooper during the invasion, said “During that whole time, there were no conflicts in the camps between people of different social classes, nor did we

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<sup>23</sup> Humberto Fontova, “They Fought Like Tigers at the Bay of Pigs”, FrontPageMag, History News Network, <http://hnn.us/roundup/entries/125561.html> (accessed April 22, 2010).

<sup>24</sup> Lynch, *Decision for Disaster*, 92.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 81.

experience any racial problems.”<sup>26</sup> Carrillo also commented “There was great harmony and love among us because we went through so many difficulties together.”<sup>27</sup> Carrillo’s words are important because he is Afro-Cuban and adds a different perspective than that of Abril or Lynch. Carrillo’s description coincides with other soldiers’ thoughts on race and equality within Brigade 2506. Hearing this same view from a black soldier reaffirms the argument that racial equality existed regardless of the actual number of black soldiers represented. With blacks underrepresented as compared to whites, one would think there might have been some racial animosity. But the description of race relations by both black and white soldiers suggests that racial problems were limited or non-existent.

From the perspective of Cubans, the lack of racial animosity in the brigade was not surprising. Historian Darien J. Davis writes “In Cuba, white and blacks condemned the acts of racism and discrimination together.”<sup>28</sup> Davis’ writing refers to the period after the 1940 Constitution when solving the race issue became a prominent theme. His assessment of white and black relations in Cuba correlates with the soldiers’ feelings towards race in Brigade 2506. There existed an established sense of racial equality in Cuba that spread into the brigade.

Erneido Oliva, one of the principle leaders served as a symbol for the racial construction and equality within the brigade. Oliva originally served in the Revolution to topple Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista. Oliva became attracted to the Revolution for its devotion to solving the racial dilemma in Cuba but soon felt that Castro was using race as a tool to divide the country

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<sup>26</sup> Triay, *An Oral History of Brigade 2506*, 49.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>28</sup> Darien J. Davis, “Nationalism and Civil Rights in Cuba: A Comparative Perspective, 1930-1960,” *The Journal of Negro History* 83, no. 1 (1998): 39. *JSTOR*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2668554>.

across ideological lines. Oliva said “By the time the underground came to me, I believed that Fidel was using the colored people as a symbol to divide the country.”<sup>29</sup> This explains Oliva’s personal reasons for joining the brigade and also touches on the issue of Afro-Cubans betraying the Revolution. Oliva originally believed Castro’s propaganda about creating racial equality in Cuba but soon felt that his racial status was being used to further political gains rather than true equality. Oliva also commented “As a colored man I was sympathetic,” to the Revolution. These words reflect Oliva’s personal feeling towards the Revolution, he felt sympathetic to the cause because he was a colored man.<sup>30</sup> Oliva’s leadership status combined with his Afro-Cuban ethnicity added to the perception that 2506 was racially mixed.

Race came to the forefront after Brigade 2506 prisoners were interrogated by the Castro regime. Cuban militiamen reportedly called black brigade members “niggers” and questioned why they would fight alongside the “Yankees.”<sup>31</sup> Castro himself told black prisoners that they had not only betrayed their country but also the Afro-Cuban race.<sup>32</sup> If race was not an issue at the camp in Guatemala, it certainly became one after the failed attempt to overthrow Castro. Castro was dumbfounded that blacks could turn against Cuba because the Revolution intended to eliminate racial discrimination and increase standards of living for Afro-Cubans. Louis A. Pérez, Professor of History at the University of North Carolina writes “The Afro-Cubans made up a disproportionate share of the uneducated, unskilled, and unemployed meant that they were among

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<sup>29</sup> Johnson, *The Leaders’ Story of Brigade 2506*, 40-41.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

the principal and immediate beneficiaries of the early distributive policies of the revolution.”<sup>33</sup>

Pérez’s analysis indicates that Afro-Cubans benefited immediately from Castro’s reforms.

Although Afro-Cubans were grossly underrepresented, a sense of equality existed as evidenced from Oliva’s leadership position and statements made by black and white soldiers. While the majority of soldiers were considered white, it does not negate the significance of Afro-Cuban participation. Oliva’s personal reasons for joining the brigade ultimately had less to do with race than his staunch anti-communist stance. While he felt that the Revolution exploited blacks, this was not his fundamental reason for joining the brigade. Oliva believed in the Revolution at the start because he was Afro-Cuban and believed that the Revolution could benefit him personally. This could explain the lack of Afro-Cuban participation in Brigade 2506. Afro-Cubans were not willing to fight against the Revolution that aimed to benefit their social standing. Overall, the group cannot be labeled as exclusively white or overwhelmingly mixed. In terms of reasons for participation, racial injustice or inequality in Cuba was not a factor. Anti-communist sentiment and a rejection of the Revolution itself played a more important role in Afro-Cuban participation.

### **Religion**

Roman Catholicism dominated Cuba and was the predominant religion among brigade soldiers. When asked if brigade members were mostly Catholic, Protestant, or a mix of both, Dr. Abril answered “No, the Catholic religion was by far the predominant religion.”<sup>34</sup> There are no concrete numbers to determine the actual ratio of Catholics to Protestants but as in Cuba,

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<sup>33</sup> Louis A. Perez, Jr. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 243.

<sup>34</sup> Dr. Abril interview, February 4, 2011, 4.

Catholicism was the dominate religion. If the brigade can be labeled as predominantly Catholic then to what extent did religion play in their reasons for participation? On the surface, religion may not seem like a legitimate reason for motivation but quotes from various brigade members and the descriptions of Catholic rituals cannot be overlooked. The evidence shows that while religion was not a fundamental cause for participation, it contributed significantly to the exiles' anti-communism.

Carrillo joined the brigade alongside leader Manuel Artime and initially sided with Castro during the Revolution. Carrillo's family stayed behind in Cuba and both his father and brother fought against him during the Bay of Pigs invasion.<sup>35</sup> Carrillo eventually became an ordained priest.<sup>36</sup> Another soldier, only identified as Rafo, was studying to be a priest before joining the group in Guatemala.<sup>37</sup> Carrillo openly discussed religious practice at the training camp in Guatemala. Carrillo said "The religious efforts were in some ways similar to those of a parish church. We had daily mass, gave catechism classes, and prepared some men for their first Holy Communion. Some men were even baptized at the camps. There were also Protestant ceremonies, but 90 percent of the men were Roman Catholic."<sup>38</sup>

Carrillo's description is interesting for two reasons, the fact that some soldiers were not Catholic but became baptized at the camp and the comparison to a parish church. There does not seem to have been a formal church structure at the Base Camp but religious services mimicked those of a typical mass. The fact that some soldiers converted to or were not Catholic before

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<sup>35</sup> Triay, *An Oral History of Brigade 2506*, 48.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Johnson, *The Leaders' Story of Brigade 2506*, 47.

<sup>38</sup> Triay, *An Oral History of Brigade 2506*, 49.

arriving at the training camp suggests that religion became important to these exiles in preparation for the invasion. Carrillo stated that ten percent of the soldiers were not Catholic, mentioning that Protestant ceremonies took place as well. However, he does not include a concrete number attributed to those who were neither Catholic nor Protestant. Nevertheless the brigade was overwhelmingly Catholic according to several veterans. Carrillo does not seem to place more importance on the Catholic Church and does not portray Protestants in a negative light. Religious practice seems to have been a cultural event within the brigade as members openly practiced their religion.

Dr. Arturo Lopez, a physician whose name does not appear on the brigade list, mentioned a priest performing mass after the invasion.<sup>39</sup> Lopez's group was not a part of the initial assault and never arrived at the Bay of Pigs. Therefore, this mass was performed elsewhere, presumably in Guatemala. A priest gathered the group of soldiers to lift their spirits and rally them for a second battle.<sup>40</sup> In this situation, the priest played an important role for Lopez and other soldiers. Although they felt defeated and sympathetic towards their friends who were taken prisoner or killed, this priest attempted to rejuvenate morale and prepare the soldiers for another invasion. After hearing about the invasion's failure, some brigade members focused on their religious values for personal motivation. It is not surprising that the brigade included men of the cloth but it seems in this instance that soldiers turned to a priest to liven their spirit and provide some motivation for another invasion.

Oliva's participation, mentioned above, was not based on his perspective on race and the Revolution but rather a commitment to anti-communism. At the core of his anti-communist

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<sup>39</sup> Diary, "Recollections from the Base "Trax" in Guatemala," 1961, Folder: Hartmann serials - Latin America Box 32, Robert T. Hartmann Papers, Gerald R Ford Library, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



stance was a philosophical dilemma that pinned his religious beliefs to the Revolution. After commenting on the race issue Oliva said “Beyond all that, however, was the fact that as a lifelong Catholic I could not support communism.”<sup>41</sup> This quote succinctly sums up Oliva’s reason for joining Brigade 2506. Oliva’s dilemma was simple; he did not feel that he could be a Catholic and a communist at the same time. Although Castro did not entirely suppress religious practice in 1959-60, communist ideology endorsed secularism and denounced religious institutions. Oliva may not have anticipated the end of Catholicism in Cuba but felt that communism was a severe enough threat to his religious values that he joined Brigade 2506. Although he was unhappy with Castro’s portrayal of race in Cuba, Oliva believed his own personal religious beliefs trumped the race issue. He may have agreed with some Revolutionary reforms but was not prepared to sacrifice his religious practice in a communist Cuba. Oliva had not joined the Revolution under the assumption that Cuba would become communist after Batista’s demise. When trying to explain why some revolutionaries would flee Cuba and join an anti-Castro military unit, Oliva’s case must be taken into consideration. Whether it was religion, or just a general rejection of communist ideology, it seems that some former pro-Castro supporters became disillusioned after 1959. Oliva was not persuaded by money or material but by his deep rooted Catholic beliefs.

When asked if communism was viewed as threat to religious practice, Mario Abril answered that “Oh absolutely, I knew people who were there in a holy war.”<sup>42</sup> Abril also made it clear that the idea of holy war did not permeate throughout the entire brigade, instead saying that he knew a handful of soldiers who were there to defend their religion.<sup>43</sup> While this statement

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<sup>41</sup> Johnson, *The Leaders’ Story of Brigade 2506*, 41.

<sup>42</sup> Dr. Abril interview, February 4, 2011. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

includes an extremely small number of soldiers, it does not underscore the importance placed on religion. If this small group of soldiers considered the invasion to be a holy war then what were they defending their religion against? Oliva's description confirms this same sentiment, that it was impossible to be Catholic and communist at the same time. These men felt the same way and viewed communism as threat to their religious beliefs. Abril was not fighting to protect his religious beliefs but a perceived threat to Cuban democracy. For the men who believed they were involved in a holy war, communism was still the main threat regardless of religion or race.

Other soldiers' recollections from Camp Base Trax reveal the same personal emphasis on religion before the invasion. José "Pepe" Regalado commented that he took communion before the invasion so that he could be "in a state of grace" in case death, injury, or imprisonment awaited him.<sup>44</sup> Another soldier said that it was his duty as "a Cuban, Christian, and member of the great democratic world," to participate in the invasion.<sup>45</sup> Again, the religious overtones are prevalent in descriptions about religious practice and identity. Most of the soldiers clearly identified themselves to be Catholic or Protestant and in their minds, they were Christian and communism was secular.

The willingness to participate with the United States involves the U.S. model of democracy which allows for religious freedom. Many exiles admired the United States and it became the prime destination for those looking to flee Cuba. The Catholic Church reached out to exiles in Miami and by 1961, the diocese of Miami had spent nearly 1.5 million dollars in assisting Cuban refugees.<sup>46</sup> Undoubtedly this show of support strengthened some exiles belief in Catholicism.

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<sup>44</sup> Triay, *An Oral History of Brigade 2506*, 63-67.

<sup>45</sup> Johnson, *The Leaders' Story of Brigade 2506*, 259.

<sup>46</sup> Maria Cristina Garcia, *Havana USA: Cuban Exiles and Cuban Americans in South*

Before the Guatemalan coup in 1954, the CIA attempted to gain anti-communist support by convincing the Catholic Church hierarchy in the United States to warn parishioners about communism in Guatemala.<sup>47</sup> The Catholic Church then convinced Catholic leaders in Guatemala to read a pastoral letter and distribute leaflets that explained the dangers of communism.<sup>48</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that the CIA engaged in the same tactics in Cuba but it would seem like a possibility considering the parallels between the coercive operations in both countries. Either way, the Catholic Church was influential in assisting Cuban refugees and this surely strengthened exile belief in the Church. When discussing the Catholic Church, Myrna Pardo Millan commented “At the time, the church gave us a feeling that we had to do something to fight Communism and not just stand by with our arms crossed. That feeling of duty to defend our faith was what motivated my husband to involve himself in something to remedy the situation.”<sup>49</sup>

Quotes from various brigade members about religious practice and the threat of communism’s encroachment upon their beliefs fueled anti-communist opposition. Religion was not a primary cause of soldiers’ participation but it was a part of the animosity against the Castro regime. Some soldiers became worried that their right to practice Catholicism freely in Cuba could be restricted. Others felt more strongly, insisting that they were participating in a holy war, but this idea was restricted to a handful of participants. In any case, the majority of soldiers were Catholic and soldiers’ anti-communism was influenced by a perceived threat to their Catholic values.

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*Florida, 1959-1994* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 39.

<sup>47</sup> Kinzer and Schelsinger, *Bitter Fruit*, 170.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Triay, *An Oral History of Brigade 2506*, 159.

### Politics

Politically, brigade members varied in their former allegiances and ideologies. There is evidence to suggest that soldiers of Brigade 2506 were extensively varied in their political beliefs before leaving Cuba. Some brigade soldiers participated in the Cuban Revolution but became disillusioned after 1959 and left for the United States. Other brigade soldiers had supported Batista and fled the country to avoid persecution. Castro sought to eliminate his political enemies and some families had three choices, participate in the Revolution, form an internal resistance, or flee Cuba entirely. Regardless of previous political beliefs, exiles shared the common opinion that the Revolution would not benefit them. The same was true for brigade members who saw a potential invasion as a way to return to Cuba and establish a true democratic government. The brigade cannot be identified as anti-Castro or anti-Batista in their political sympathies before the war. Their one common political ideology was a rejection of the socialist policies put forth by Castro after the Revolution.

In a CNN interview, Bay of Pigs veteran Alfredo Duran said “We were looking towards the future of Cuba and to the best interests of the Cuban people and the republic.”<sup>50</sup> The fact that Duran still believed in Cuba as a republic nearly forty years after the political transformation is significant. His personal attitude towards Cuba reveals the larger attitude of most soldiers. Christina Maria Garcia argues that Cuban exiles struggled to define democracy as some favored a more authoritarian form and others argued for a democracy based on that of United States.<sup>51</sup> Although they were divided in Cuba between pro-Batista and pro-Castro supporters, soldiers from

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<sup>50</sup> Susan Candiotti and Garrick Utley, *Four Decades Later, Exiles’ anti-Castro Passion Still High*, CNN.com Archives, <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/fyi/news/04/17/bay.of.pigs/> (accessed March 3, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> Garcia, *Havana, USA*, 3.

Brigade 2506 envisioned a Cuban republic.

As with religion, examining political backgrounds cannot be based on numerical assessments but rather a variety of soldiers' first-hand accounts.<sup>52</sup> Brigade members did not adhere to one specific political ideology before or after the Revolution. If the Revolution had not benefited many exiles then the assumption would be that most exiles were anti-Castro from the very beginning. Statements from brigade members however dispute this notion. It is impossible to completely determine the full extent of the exiles' political backgrounds but they were not overwhelmingly pro-Castro or pro-Batista before the Revolution. After 1959 however, exiles became disillusioned with the Revolution. The exiles in Brigade 2506 were vehemently anti-Castro and adamantly opposed to the new regime. Ideology was a driving factor behind exile participation. Brigade soldiers were highly politicized and committed to interrupting the political discourse under Castro. Soldiers did not hide their nationalistic feelings and their devotion to combating socialism in Cuba. Political idealists became counterrevolutionary soldiers when they joined Brigade 2506.

Cuba experienced a high rate of emigration after 1959. From January, 1959 through September, 1977, nearly 665,000 Cubans exiles flocked to the United States.<sup>53</sup> Some of the exiles included those who Castro deemed "undesirable" but many were political refugees. By allowing Cubans to leave, Castro eliminated political enemies who were defiant towards the Revolution. The exiles who arrived in the United States initially considered themselves temporary residents and thought that an eventual return to Cuba was imminent. Exiles refused to call themselves

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<sup>52</sup> There are not enough statistics to determine the actual political ideologies of each individual soldier in Brigade 2506. Relying on first-hand accounts is the most accurate technique in determining political allegiances and ideology.

<sup>53</sup> Garcia, *Havana, USA*, 45.

immigrants and some even refused the naturalization process because they felt that by doing so they were betraying their Cuban identity.<sup>54</sup> So while Cuban refugees did not wish to live in a socialist Cuba, they were not willing to part with their Cuban identities either.

One question that must be addressed is how these men became so ideologically motivated in the first place? Castro's Revolution intended to improve the overall lives of the Cuban people but obviously it also lowered the standard of living for many citizens. After the revolution, maintaining higher social statuses became extremely difficult. Students who felt alienated by socialist rhetoric and public displays of violence wanted to voice their opposition. The student movement has always played a role in shaping Latin American politics in the twentieth century and the young men in Brigade 2506 were no exception. They were young, politically charged, and willing to participate in a united political movement.

Mario Abril represents one of these young and motivated soldiers. He attended public school in Cuba and eventually moved to Miami with his family after suspecting that the Revolution was taking a turn for the worse.<sup>55</sup> Abril's reason for participating in the invasion dealt with his dislike for Castro. Abril discussed the role of politics in student life by saying:

In those days, 1950s and at that age, 23-24, young men, especially young men who hoped to be educated, vented their hormonal excesses, social excesses not in the way folks do up here (United States). We didn't get drunk, we didn't do drugs, what we did was, was attempted to become activists in politics. There is a long tradition of Latin American youth who took charge and participated in momentous events in the political lives of their countries. Cuba was no exception to that.<sup>56</sup>

Abril identifies himself and other young Cuban men as being politically aware and also involved in

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 1-5.

<sup>55</sup> Triay, *An Oral History of Brigade 2506*, 50. Abril's father had worked in the Ministry of Education and suspected that the Revolution was becoming more socialist in nature.

<sup>56</sup> Dr. Abril interview, February 4, 2011, 1.

the political process. The Revolution included students just as it did workers so it is no surprise that students would be actively involved in the anti-Castro movement as well. Given this statement, one can infer that the Cuban political movement in Miami is a continuation of this long tradition of political involvement in Cuba. Whether they were pro-Batista or pro-Castro before 1959, brigade soldiers, especially students were engaged in the Cuban political tradition. Their actions at the Bay of Pigs were the result of political discussion and animosity that bled into military opportunity.

Victor Triay's oral history of Brigade 2506 reveals the differences in political alliances and how supporters of Batista and Castro eventually agreed on an anti-communist ideology. The cases of Nino Diaz and Hugu Sueiro exemplify the political divide among brigade soldiers before 1959. Diaz had fought alongside Castro during the Revolution but became alienated with the leader's move towards communism.<sup>57</sup> Diaz harnessed his personal opposition to Castro and helped to create the MRR or the *Movimiento de Recuperacion Revolucionaria*, and carried out sabotage missions in Cuba before joining the Brigade.<sup>58</sup> Diaz commented that his suspicions of Raul Castro's communist connections led him to defy the Revolution, especially when a rumor leaked out that Raul Castro wanted Diaz dead.<sup>59</sup> Hugu Sueiro, who noted that he came from a poor family, was a military cadet at the time of Batista's exile from Cuba and stated that he was relieved that the ordeal was over (between Batista and Castro).<sup>60</sup> Sueiro stayed in the military after Castro's takeover but became disillusioned when Communist leaders began indoctrinating

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<sup>57</sup> Triay, *An Oral History of Brigade 2506*, 21-23.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Triay, *An Oral History of Brigade 2506*, 23-26.

troops.<sup>61</sup> These cases illustrate the differences in political alliances before the Revolution but also similarities in support for a non-communist Cuba. Sueiro did not initially appear to be vehemently opposed to Castro and worked as a soldier under both regimes. In each case, the perceived threat of communism motivated their move to the United States and eventually their participation in the Bay of Pigs Invasion.

Because of their different political alliances before Castro's ascent to power, the Brigade cannot be labeled as anti-Batista or pro-Castro. Neither of these labels applies to the brigade soldiers because it was their anti-Castro sentiments that brought them to the United States and motivated their participation in Brigade 2506. In other words, their political positions during the Revolution mattered less than their extreme dislike of Castro and the Revolution's gradual move towards communism.

### Age

Age is an important social factor to examine that helps explain the soldiers' willingness to participate in a military invasion and an ideological war. The brigade database provided to me by Mario Abril contains over 3,000 names but the invasion force contained 1,300 to 1,400 soldiers. There is a significant discrepancy between these numbers but not every man listed was a part of the invasion force. A narrower focus must be analyzed and after filtering the information, I narrowed the participants down to 1,266. This number is slightly lower than the number of actual soldiers who participated but it is reasonable to suggest that these 1,266 soldiers provide an overall representation of Brigade 2506. The list was initially narrowed down by brigade number, that is, those assigned an actual number starting at 2,200 (the list did not start at one to give Castro the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.



impression that the brigade force was larger than it actually was). After narrowing down those actually assigned a number, I further compressed the list by age, profession, marital status, and place of birth. The 1,266 listed soldiers all have records indicated for the above mentioned categories and many have monetary values (or ransoms) associated with their imprisonment. Analyzing this data provides several insights into the brigade's collective identity.

The brigade was comprised mostly of young men who were ideologically driven but wanted to act on their ideas and beliefs. The spectrum in this data ranges from 15 to 58, a wide margin indeed but after closer examination, most soldiers were between the ages of 20 and 30.<sup>62</sup> The chart below indicates the specific numbers and percentages ascribed to certain age ranges.

Ages for 1,266 Soldiers in Brigade 2506

<b>Age</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
15 – 19	130	10%
20 – 24	333	26%
25 – 29	319	25%
30 – 34	241	19%
35 – 39	147	12%
40 – 44	66	5%
45 – 59	28	2%

Source: Database provided by Dr. Mario Abril. The list was likely compiled by former Bay of Pigs veterans at the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association in Miami, FL.

The data indicates a steady drop off in the number of participants starting from twenty years of age to fifty-nine. Sixty-six percent of students included in the list are under the age of thirty. From these statistics, one can conclude that close to sixty-five percent of the brigade was

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<sup>62</sup> Database provided by Dr. Mario Abril. The list was likely compiled by former Bay of Pigs veterans at the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association in Miami, FL.

under the age of thirty and over fifty percent were between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine.

The fact that the brigade was so young comes as no surprise. Training was physical and required a great amount of stamina. Abril emphasized this point numerous times and reemphasized the point that Brigade 2506 was comprised of mostly young men. Statistics and first-hand accounts indicate that the brigade was overwhelming young in nature. Although it included some middle-aged men, the majority were young and politically motivated. Young men are usually in better physical condition and often idealistic, especially in the case of students. Young students had the opportunity to act on their ideals through military action.

### **Profession (In Cuba)**

There does not seem to be enough working class jobs represented to label the brigade as a true cross-section of Cuban society. There was a vast array of occupations that ranged from law to farming. The brigade included professionals, students, and working class men. The majority of soldiers were listed as either students, military men, or under the general term “employees”. Abril commented “There were some professionals, there were doctors, there were three priests, and one Protestant minister. There were poets, there were lawyers, a wide range of society.”<sup>63</sup> After military and students, there was indeed a wide variety of professions. The trend that develops among the various occupations is that many of the recruits worked in fields that could be considered middle class or higher. There were not as many working class occupations represented among recruits as compared to more prestigious professions. Overall, the brigade included occupations that were working class in nature but the majority of soldiers could be considered middle to upper class.

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<sup>63</sup> Dr. Abril interview, February 4, 2011. 1.

Again, nearly half of all soldiers are listed as being students, military men, or general employees. Students represent the highest number, 260 out of the sample of 1,266 soldiers were considered students.<sup>64</sup> The chart below shows the five most common professions among brigade soldiers.

Most Represented Professions from Sample of 1,266 Soldiers

<b>Profession</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Percentage of Total</b>
Student	260	20.5%
General Employee	221	17.45%
Military	207	16.35%
Businessman/Trader	51	4%
Mechanic	38	3%

Source: Database provided by Dr. Mario Abril. The list was likely compiled by former Bay of Pigs veterans at the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association in Miami, FL.

The chart reveals how lopsided the top three professions are in relation to the next most frequent occupations. Other professions that were frequent among soldiers included lawyers, farmers, drivers, accountants, teachers, engineers, and salesman.<sup>65</sup> The great majority of these jobs can be classified as middle class with some exceptions. Farmers, drivers, and mechanics might have worked for lower wages. There does not seem to be an abundance of low wage occupations. The list provides some insight into the type of jobs that *empleados* worked. The word *empleado* translates to *employee* in English and could reference numerous occupations. For instance, some soldiers are listed as being public employees, banking employees, construction

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<sup>64</sup> Database provided by Dr. Mario Abril. The list was likely compiled by former Bay of Pigs veterans at the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association in Miami, FL.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

employees, electric employee , and telephone employees.<sup>66</sup> The general sense was that being an employee meant working in a profession that was above a general laborer. There were a number of *obreros* or workers in the brigade. The fact that the list would differentiate between general employee and general laborer is significant. An employee would be regarded in higher standing than a general worker which could include those from the working class. As in the case of general employees, there are labels attached to general workers as well. Two of the men were considered sugar workers implying that they worked in agriculture, possibly as field labor.<sup>67</sup> One soldier was a *fogonero* which translates into stoker and another soldier was listed as a port worker.<sup>68</sup> Both of these occupations are lower in standing than that of a banker, public employee, or electrician. Only two men out of the sample of 1,266 were considered *desocupado* or unemployed.<sup>69</sup> The low number of listed unemployed workers reveals that soldiers did not join Brigade 2506 to seek employment. Many Cuban emigrants had established careers or were on their way to building a career through studying at the universities.

Soldiers worked in a variety of occupations before joining Brigade 2506. The majority of soldiers were students or military men and a significant number of soldiers worked in middle class occupations. The soldiers' class backgrounds provided motivation for participating because they would not have benefited as greatly as the working class from the Revolution.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

## Education

The majority of soldiers were well educated and literate. Mario Abril knew of only a handful of soldiers who were illiterate and mentioned that most in the group had a higher level of education than the “average group Cuban.”<sup>70</sup> Literacy statistics from 1950 – 1953 indicate that seventy-six percent of Cubans were literate.<sup>71</sup> This data serves as a representation of literacy rates at the time of Castro’s rise to power. The Cuban literacy rate rose to ninety-six percent by 1990 and this was a reflection of many other Latin American nations at the time.<sup>72</sup> Nearly half of all Cuban children had not received any formal education in 1958.<sup>73</sup>

Compared to the country as a whole, Brigade 2505 was more educated and literate than the majority of Cubans. If twenty-four percent of Cubans were illiterate at the time then the brigade as a whole does not reflect this statistic. Higher levels of education correlate with the listed professions as many soldiers were professionals or worked skilled jobs that required a certain amount of education. The nearly 250 students were obviously literate and well educated. Again the rhetoric of Castro’s Revolution did not intend to benefit the well-educated soldiers of Brigade 2506. Castro’s literacy campaign did not affect the soldiers personally because they had already acquired the ability to read and write prior to the Revolution. The brigade was well-educated and more literate as a whole than the average group of Cubans. This supports the idea that the Brigade did not represent a cross-section of Cuban society.

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<sup>70</sup> Dr. Abril interview, February 16, 2011, 6.

<sup>71</sup> Kirby Smith and Hugo Llorens, “Renaissance and Decay: A Comparison of Socioeconomic Indicators in Pre-Castro and Current-Day Cuba,” *Cuba in Transition* 8, (1998): 149. *LANIC* <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/asce/pdfs/volume8/30smith.pd>.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Pérez. *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 273.

Analyzing social and political backgrounds provides insight into the soldiers' ideologies and reasons for participation. The backgrounds of Brigade 2506 soldiers influenced their anti-communist ideology and ultimately led them to leave Cuba and take up arms against Castro's Revolution.

### **Idealists, Counterrevolutionaries, and Debunking the Mercenary Theory**

After analyzing the social backgrounds of brigade soldiers, the question arises, what were the primary reasons for participation? Brigade 2506 was anti-Castro, predominately Catholic, well-educated, and mostly from the middle to upper classes of Cuban society. The fundamental reason for joining Brigade 2506 was to overthrow Fidel Castro and establish a non-communist government. The underlying cause for participation was the idea that the Revolution would cause more harm than good. The Revolution was aimed at the working class and intended to improve social conditions for these people. Cuban exiles, such as the brigade soldiers, would not benefit as greatly from Castro's socialist agenda. By joining Brigade 2506, exiled Cuban men became counterrevolutionaries because their intention was to overthrow Castro, thus ending the continuation of the Revolution.

Many soldiers supported Castro initially because he promised a brand of democracy that was counter to the corrupt, dictatorial version of democracy under Batista. As Cubans caught wind of Castro's socialist agenda, many became disillusioned with Castro's vision of the "New Cuba" and exiled to the United States. Word spread that an invasion force was being established and exiled men volunteered to join the brigade. Castro labeled the soldiers as mercenaries after the Bay of Pigs Invasion. They were not paid like mercenaries and fought for ideals, not material gain. Castro could not understand why these soldiers would agree to fight in a U.S. funded

military operation. Although they received funding and training from the United States, soldiers identified strictly as Cubans and their statements reveal strong nationalistic sentiments.

Statements by numerous veterans indicate a strong sense of pride when talking about the invasion. Although the Bay of Pigs was a defeat for the Cuban force, a sense of nationalism persists to this day among veterans. Eventually most of the exiles became United States citizens but they still identify with their Cuban roots. In their minds, the Bay of Pigs Invasion was not a rouge CIA operation but a legitimate invasion that would lead to the demise of Castro. One veteran's perspective provides insight into how soldiers viewed the invasion. The veteran stated "This was a Civil War. It was father shooting against son, brother against brother."<sup>74</sup> Another soldier commented that he felt like Rhett Butler from *Gone with the Wind* while putting on his uniform, an obvious reference to the United States' Civil War.<sup>75</sup> This soldier's statement elicited a sort of romanticism involved in the invasion. War is appealing to young men who are ideologically motivated and willing to sacrifice their lives for a cause greater than themselves. This idea of the invasion being a civil war reveals how soldiers viewed the invasion as their own, as a Cuban operation. They did not identify themselves as being soldiers in a United States military operation but as Cuban liberators. They may have believed in fighting for the greater cause of democracy but they were nationalists at the same time.

Arturo Lopez's diary includes nationalistic language and also provides insight into his national identity. Lopez's name does not appear on the Brigade list but there is a possibility that his name was omitted. It is unlikely that he participated under another name because soldiers

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<sup>74</sup> Candiotti and Utley, "Remembering the Bay of Pigs Invasion."

<sup>75</sup> Johnson, *The Leaders' Story of Brigade 2506*, 99.

underwent an extensive background search before officially joining the brigade.<sup>76</sup> The question then arises as to the legitimacy of Lopez's diary. Another soldier's experience, however, is similar to Dr. Lopez's description of his involvement and like Lopez, this soldier's name does not appear in the brigade list. Alberto Sanchez de Bustamante was a part of a surgical team that was supposed to be supplied with a hospital ship but learned that these plans were cancelled.<sup>77</sup> In his diary Lopez wrote "Once I found out we were deceived about a Hospital Ship which never existed and which had been promised [...]."<sup>78</sup> Lopez further states that he lost confidence in the Americans effort to supply the brigade with necessary equipment.<sup>79</sup> Sanchez de Bustamante and Lopez both mention a hospital ship that was promised but never delivered. Both men were physicians and are not listed on the brigade list.

Lopez's negative view towards communism was evident when he referred to Castro's Army as "the Communist hordes" and his Cuban nationalism is evident when he refers to Cuba as "the Fatherland."<sup>80</sup> The word *fatherland* elicits nationalistic overtones and referring to Castro's Army as "Communist hordes" reveals a strong anti-communist and anti-Castro attitude. Lopez's language coincides with other veteran's attitudes towards Castro and communism and seems to serve as Lopez's motivation for joining the brigade. Soldier Jorge Marquet commented "I plan to return to my fatherland, and I don't want a Communist fatherland with Fidel's dictatorship."<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Dr. Abril interview, February 16, 2011, 4.

<sup>77</sup> Triay, *An Oral History of Brigade 2506*. 128.

<sup>78</sup> Arturo Lopez, "Recollections from the Base Trax in Guatemala" 2.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Arturo Lopez, "Recollections from the Base Trax in Guatemala" 6.

<sup>81</sup> Triay, *an Oral History of Brigade 2505*, 31.



Both Lopez and Marquet used *fatherland* when talking about Cuba and Marquet's statement indicates that he wanted to live in a Cuba that was not communist or governed by a dictator.

Two quotes from Lopez assist in understanding Cuban identity in the brigade. Lopez expressed anger when a "top Chief" told him that they (CIA or the United States) were sacrificing more for Cuba. Lopez wrote "I said to him they were working on their own behalf and I would not tolerate anyone giving me lessons in patriotism."<sup>82</sup> Lopez's words are critical for two reasons: he separates the two parties involved as Cuban versus non-Cuban and defends his national patriotism. Lopez was obviously offended by the chief's comment and reaffirmed his Cuban nationalism by implying that his patriotism was not in question. Lopez separates himself from the Americans in another instance when he comments "We are Latins, not of Saxon temperament."<sup>83</sup> There is also a racial and geographic component to this statement. Lopez sees himself as Latin and the CIA agents as Saxons or Americans. Latin could refer to Latin America itself or perhaps Lopez was placing himself in a racial category. Either way, Lopez made the distinction between both parties and separated himself as a Cuban.

Castro interrogated many of the men after their imprisonment, going as far as to broadcast the interrogations on television from the Havana Sports Palace. In one interrogation, veteran Fabio Freyre was asked why he joined the invasion. Freyre responded "Because I want in my country the establishment of the 1940 Constitution, a democratic government with the free press and elections so the people can choose their own government."<sup>84</sup> Freyre implied that Castro was not elected but seized power through the Revolution. Free elections likely became a main issue of

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<sup>82</sup> Arturo Lopez, "Recollections from the Base Trax in Guatemala" 3.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson, *The Leaders' Story of Brigade 2506*, 207.

contention for exiles like Freyre. If the 1940 Constitution aimed to create a democracy like that of the United States, then the Revolution defied some democratic principles. Freyre's statement best describes the soldiers' feelings towards Castro and communism. Soldiers believed that their democratic ideals clashed with Castro's socialist agenda. Because their ideals clashed with those of the "New Cuba," Brigade 2506 was counterrevolutionary.

Immediately after the invasion, Castro referred to the brigade as mercenaries and reemphasized this point numerous times.<sup>85</sup> If the soldiers were mercenaries then there must have been financial incentives for participation. Castro's assertion that brigade soldiers were mercenaries was a political tool to convince Cubans that the soldiers were not true revolutionaries. This would imply that soldiers joined the brigade for monetary incentives or mainly to serve the United States' goals. Brigade soldiers were paid \$225 dollars a month which was typical pay for a U.S. Army private at that time according to Abril.<sup>86</sup> "Mercenary" implies that the soldiers were working for the United States government. If they were paid as regular privates then this would seem to indicate that the exiles were in fact carrying out a mission for the United States. However, considering their class background, the soldiers as a whole had few reasons for monetary incentive as many of them were already well-off. The military pay was compensation for training in preparation for the invasion. Soldiers were motivated by personal ideals and their own self interests, not that of the United States.

When asked about the mercenary label attached to the brigade Abril responded by stating that Castro used the mercenary theory as propaganda and knew that the exiles were not legitimate

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<sup>85</sup> Fidel Castro, *Castro Communique Announces Victory*, in the Castro Speech Database, Latin American Network Information Center, <http://www1.lanicutexas.edu/project/castro/db/1961/19610420.html> (accessed April 22, 2010).

<sup>86</sup> Dr. Abril interview, February 4, 2011, 4.

mercenaries.<sup>87</sup> He further stated “You would have to pay me more than two-hundred dollars to be a mercenary,” and explained that the word has become a joke of sorts between himself and other veterans.<sup>88</sup> Obviously, in the case of Abril, the mercenary label is not taken as seriously. Veterans do not identify as mercenaries and if there was no material incentive besides basic military pay then it is difficult to argue that Castro’s assessment was accurate. If the exiles had been from the working class then the mercenary theory would have more credibility. Working class soldiers would be more inclined to participate for material incentives. The fact that most soldiers were from the middle to upper class and identified as nationalists means they were unlikely to be mercenaries. Their ideological self-interests came before the interests of the United States.

### **The Relationship between Soldiers, CIA, and the Kennedy Administration**

A sense of betrayal prevailed among veterans, including CIA agent Grayston Lynch after the brigade’s defeat. Lynch’s animosity was aimed at President Kennedy but also the men working in his administration. Broken promises caused many veterans to form a negative opinion of Kennedy but not the United States itself. After their release from prison in Cuba, soldiers returned to the United States and became U.S. citizens. According to Brigade 2506 veterans, the United States promised to use military force if the brigade was facing immediate defeat. The fact that Kennedy made the decision not to intervene directly led to the “betrayal” that many veterans refer to. The complex relationship between the soldiers, CIA, and Kennedy administration became apparent after the invasion. The brigade depended on the CIA and the United States for

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<sup>87</sup> Dr. Abril interview, February 16, 2011, 5.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

training and funding but the U.S. military was limited in their direct involvement. While soldiers viewed themselves as separate from the U.S. military, they relied on its assistance and believed that the military would provide air support if required.

Political scientist Piero Gleijeses contends that the CIA and White House were not on the same page in regard to the invasion.<sup>89</sup> The CIA believed that the Kennedy White House was willing to do more than it actually was prepared to do. According to CIA plans, the initial invasion would fuel a popular uprising within weeks after the landing and if the uprisings did not occur, the United States military would intervene directly.<sup>90</sup> The truth was that the White House was not prepared to engage the United States armed forces in the operation. The “betrayal” occurred after soldiers realized that Kennedy was not prepared to take action. Abril commented “I saw with my eyes, an airplane carrier on the horizon way back there. I saw with my eyes the American planes flying over. I thought, if you keep those guys away, we’ll be able to manage but it was not to be.”<sup>91</sup> One can imagine the excitement that soldiers experienced while seeing American planes but when the U.S. did not intervene a feeling of disappointment emerged. Although they viewed themselves as a Cuban force, they relied on the U.S. for assistance if the invasion failed to initiate a popular uprising in the countryside. The decision to carry out a conventional assault came at the last moment as soldiers believed that the invasion would occur near the Escambray Mountains and would be more representative of a guerilla war.<sup>92</sup> In the end, Kennedy was not willing to provide military support as had been promised, according to both the

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<sup>89</sup> Gleijeses, “Ships in the Night: The CIA, the White House and the Bay of Pigs,” 2.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>91</sup> Dr. Abril interview, February 4, 2011, 5.

<sup>92</sup> Dr. Abril interview, February 16 2011, 8.

CIA and the brigade.

At least one member of the Kennedy administration expressed doubts about using Cuban exiles in a covert military operation. Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Mann drafted a memo sent to Secretary of State Dean Rusk that argued against an invasion. Among the points that Mann described in the memo included: the invasion seemed more like a military operation than a covert operation and there was a chance that the invasion could attract more support for Castro.<sup>93</sup> Richard Bissell, the CIA agent responsible for overseeing the operation believed that Kennedy was handcuffed by “inherited policy decisions” from Eisenhower’s administration.<sup>94</sup> Bissell noted the frustration of veterans when he stated “The frustration of the Cubans was apparent. Many were saying that they were prepared to recapture their homeland without U.S. assistance and that the government was actively preventing them from doing so.”<sup>95</sup> Bissell’s insight confirms two points; the Kennedy Administration was reluctant to take action and the soldiers became increasingly concerned with the U.S.’s commitment to the invasion. Bissell’s comments also seem to indicate that the soldier’s viewed themselves separate from the U.S. military. The brigade was willing to carry out the operation without U.S. assistance meaning a rift existed between the two entities. Kennedy addressed a group of newspaper editors three days after the invasion and emphasized that the United States would not intervene in the situation.<sup>96</sup> If the

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<sup>93</sup> Thomas C. Mann. “Memorandum from the Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs (Mann) to Secretary of State Rusk, February 15, 1961. (Arguing against invasion an invasion of Cuba).” Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Countries Series, Cuba, General 1/61-4/61. Top Secret; Eyes Only. <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/baypig5.htm>.

<sup>94</sup> Richard M. Bissell. *Reflections of a Cold Warrior: From Yalta to the Bay of Pigs* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 163.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> John F. Kennedy, “Address before the American Society of Newspaper Editors” (speech

president's stance towards Cuba was not clearly defined on April 17<sup>th</sup>, he left no doubt as to the United States role three days later. After the failure at the Bay of Pigs, the United States maintained their neutrality while soldiers of Brigade 2506 were interrogated and sent to prison, feeling betrayed by the Kennedy administration.

Kennedy faced the dilemma of helping nearly 1,100 Cuban exiles return to the United States. The soldiers felt that they had been abandoned by the White House during the invasion. The overwhelming majority of soldiers was taken prisoner but released a year later and began their lives as citizens in the United States. When they returned, soldiers felt disdain towards Kennedy for not taking a more active role in the operation. The feeling of betrayal was not limited to Cubans as Grayston Lynch expressed his animosity by stating "For the first time in my thirty-seven years, I was ashamed of my country."<sup>97</sup> Lynch further explained that the soldiers who returned to the United States never disliked the American people, implying that their contempt was aimed only at the White House. Abril expressed this same attitude as well and implied that he had always admired the American people but disliked Kennedy's positions.<sup>98</sup> While soldiers scornfully disapproved of Kennedy's political positions, they did not dislike the American people and could identify with American values. If the overall objective was to establish a system of democracy in Cuba then the United States served as the model. When returning to the U.S., soldiers had little choice but to become members of American society. There still, however, existed the idea of one day returning to Cuba.

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given at the Statler Hilton Head Hotel, Washington, D.C. April 20, 1961). *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum*. <http://www.jfklibrary.org>.

<sup>97</sup> Lynch, *Decision for Disaster*, 132.

<sup>98</sup> Dr. Abril interview, February 16, 2011, 7.

There is a perception that the Bay of Pigs invasion involved two distinct parties, each with different motivations. The White House was using the soldiers to achieve the political objective of preventing the spread of communism into the Western Hemisphere. The soldiers viewed the operation as a chance to return to Cuba and restore or create a democracy that would benefit their interests. The overarching objective was to eliminate communism from Cuba which served as the main motivation for both sides. The exiles depended on the United States for training and funding but they were also disillusioned with the Kennedy administration's level of commitment for a military invasion. They saw themselves as Cuban but relied on the U.S. for assistance. As soldier Rolando Martinez commented "The Americans helped, but I did it as a member of the MRR, and I did it for Cuba."<sup>99</sup> The MRR was an underground group formed by Brigade leader Manuel Artime in Cuba prior to the invasion. The relationship between the U.S. and the brigade was complex and neither side agreed about the extent of U.S. military participation.

### **Imprisonment and Release**

The majority of soldiers were taken prisoner after the invasion and spent close to a year and a half in Cuban prisons. Soldiers had time to reflect on the perceived betrayal by the Kennedy White House and think about their own Cuban identity. Nearly 1,100 soldiers were captured during the invasion. Abril recalls the moment in which he became a prisoner in his own country:

All of a sudden, and this is why I say I must have been confused about the circumstances, there were voices all around us. I remember I took my .45 caliber gun and cocked it and went down on my face into the mangrove. I tried to be as still as possible and the next thing I know and I don't know how long I was there, a boot was on my wrist, and the muzzle of a sub machinegun was 6 inches from my head. That's how I was captured and of course the usual yank of the insignia on the shirt, some name-calling and all that. The feeling at that time was a tremendous disillusion. A feeling of how could this happen for

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<sup>99</sup> Triay, *an Oral History of Brigade 2506*, 35.

god's sake, what the hell went wrong here?<sup>100</sup>

Abril's comment reveals the disillusionment that soldiers experienced after the invasion and during imprisonment. Soldiers had been confident that their actions would spawn a counter-revolution in Cuba but realized that a general uprising did not occur. Instead, Castro interrogated and imprisoned many brigade soldiers. Castro placed a monetary value to each soldiers' imprisonment that ranged from \$25,000 to \$500,000.<sup>101</sup> Only three men in the database document had a bounty of \$500,000 placed on them.<sup>102</sup> These men were Manuel Artime, José "Pepe" San Roman, and Erneido Oliva, the three most important leaders during the invasion.<sup>103</sup>

Castro publicly showcased the prisoners at the Havana Sports Palace and televised the interrogations in Cuba. The Cuban president portrayed the invasion force as mercenaries and questioned the soldiers' nationalism.<sup>104</sup> In one instance, Castro asked a soldier if he would fight alongside his fellow Cubans if the United States should invade.<sup>105</sup> The soldier responded that "We would not fight to save the regime or our lives but this is a matter that should be solved by Cubans."<sup>106</sup> An interesting aspect of the soldier's statement is that he identifies himself as a Cuban first and an anti-communist second. Given the soldier's circumstance at the time, he may

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<sup>100</sup> Dr. Abril interview, February 4, 2011, 5-6.

<sup>101</sup> Database provided by Dr. Mario Abril. The list was likely compiled by former Bay of Pigs veterans at the Bay of Pigs Veterans Association in Miami, FL.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> *Castro Interrogates Invasion Prisoners*. April 27, 1961. Available from: Castro Speech Database, Latin American Network Information Center, Texas University. <http://www1.lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1961/19610427.html> (accessed April 15, 2010).

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.



have said this to save himself from punishment but he still expresses his rejection of the “regime” and communism. According to this statement, the soldier identified as Cuban first and anti-Castro second.

The question soon arose as to how the prisoners would be released. Congressmen Gerald Ford commented on the prospect of negotiating the prisoner’s release from prison. Ford wrote “The possibility of having 1,113 patriots home for Christmas is a truly heartwarming objective, but this nation’s honor must not be compromised one iota in the process.”<sup>107</sup> Ford’s political attitude was evident; he did not feel that the United States should be involved in negotiating the prisoners’ release. Even though the United States had used the soldiers to achieve a political objective, politicians including Ford had concerns about petitioning for the prisoners’ release. Clearly the soldiers’ resentments towards certain political maneuvers during this period were justified and added to the sense that the government had abandoned them in Cuba. On December 23, 1961, three days after Ford’s letter to Kennedy, the prisoner exchange began after attorney James B. Donovan negotiated a deal worth 53 million dollars worth of aid in exchange for prisoners.<sup>108</sup> Most of the prisoners returned to the United States in 1963, but at least nine soldiers remained in prison, as in the case of Montero Duque who spent nearly twenty-five years in Cuba until his release in 1986.<sup>109</sup>

After being released from prison, soldiers faced the question of naturalization and many

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<sup>107</sup> Gerald R. Ford, letter to President John F. Kennedy, the papers of John F. Kennedy, Presidential Papers, White House Central Files, Folder CO 55. December 20, 1962. *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum*. <http://www.jfklibrary.org>.

<sup>108</sup> Eileen Keerdoja, “Brigade 2506,” *Newsweek*, December 12, 1977, 20. <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/bay-of-pigs/2506.htm>.

<sup>109</sup> Lourdes Meluza, “Castro Foe Reunited with Kin,” *The Miami Herald*, June 9, 1986, 1. <http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/bay-of-pigs/montero.htm>.

veterans would become U.S. citizens. Mario Abril continued his education at the University of New Mexico and went on to receive a PhD in music theory from Florida State University. He now teaches music at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and is an accomplished guitarist.<sup>110</sup> Veterans became American citizens but continued to have a voice in politics, especially involving issues pertaining to Castro and Cuba. Brigade veteran Luis Morse served in the Florida House of Representatives for fourteen years.<sup>111</sup> In 1992, Cubans held ten of twenty-eight seats occupied by the Dade County legislature.<sup>112</sup> Cuban-American impact in U.S. culture and politics continues to this day.

### **Conclusion**

Brigade 2506 was a unique unit in the sense that they were funded by the United States government but viewed themselves as separate from the U.S military. The common interest between both the United States and Brigade 2506 was a fear of communism. The exiles had a different perspective than that of the United States in this regard. If many of the exiles were from the middle and upper classes of Cuban society then the Cuban Revolution would not have benefitted their class standing in Cuba. To the young, well-educated soldiers in Brigade 2506, communism threatened their social status. Their actions at the Bay of Pigs were a response to the Revolution and can be described as counterrevolutionary. This means that the brigade soldiers intended to overthrow Castro, thus bringing an end to socialist policies enacted by the Cuban president. Establishing a democracy that mirrored that of the United States was likely their

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<sup>110</sup> Dr. Abril Interview, February 4, 2011, 10.

<sup>111</sup> Triay, *An Oral History of Brigade 2506*, 103.

<sup>112</sup> Garcia, *Havana USA*, 8.

intention.

Victor Triay and Haynes Johnson confirm that fifty Afro-Cubans were members of Brigade 2506. Given that Afro-Cubans make up at least half of the population in Cuba indicates that they were underrepresented in Brigade 2506. In fact, the brigade was “represented” by all members of Cuban society but was not “representative” of Cuban society at the time. In other words, the brigade as a whole cannot represent Cuban society because not enough black soldiers or men from the working class were well represented. After examining occupations, it seems that most soldiers were from the upper to middle class and firsthand accounts indicate that the majority of soldiers were well educated. They were fighting to restore or create a certain way of life, counter to Revolutionary principles but also were adamant about returning to Cuba because it was their country. Exiles initially refused the naturalization process because they felt that their return to Cuba was imminent.

If anti-communism was at the heart of exile participation in the Bay of Pigs Invasion then what fueled this fear or general dislike of communism? Castro intended to take away their positions of economic privilege. The revolutionary reforms were aimed at the working class. Louis Pérez argues that Castro’s Agrarian Land Reform Law of May 1959 was the most significant reform enacted immediately after Castro’s ascension to power.<sup>113</sup> He writes “By the terms of the new law, all real estate holdings were restricted in size to 1,000 acres, with the exception of land engaged in the production of sugar, rice, and livestock, where maximum limits were fixed at 3,333 acres.”<sup>114</sup> The goal of the Agrarian Reform Law was to limit the number of acres that those from the upper classes of Cuban society could own. The seized acres would presumably be

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<sup>113</sup> Pérez, *Between Reform and Revolution*, 243.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

redistributed to peasant farmers and those from the working class. This example shows how the working class benefitted immediately from revolutionary reforms while standard of living for the middle and upper classes declined.

The perceived threat of communism against religious practice also served as a factor behind soldiers' anti-communism. Quotes from various brigade soldiers confirm that religion was an important aspect in everyday life at Camp Base Trax (the training site in Guatemala). Brigade leader Erneido Oliva had a philosophical dilemma about being a Catholic and communist. In his mind, it was impossible to be both.

In summary, Brigade 2506 fought at the Bay of Pigs for ideological reasons and it cannot be labeled as a mercenary unit for the United States government. Most of the soldiers would not have benefitted from Castro's Revolution and some would have seen a reduction in their standard of living. They felt that communism was a threat to their place in Cuban society and rebelled against the reforms set in place by Castro.

The brigade soldiers' involvement in the Bay of Pigs invasion is largely ignored in the scholarship pertaining to the topic. A few monographs exist which tell the story from the soldiers' perspective but overall, the majority of research focuses more on the Kennedy administration's involvement in the invasion. Understanding the brigade's participation is necessary to gain a complete understanding of one of the most significant events in the Cold War's history. The ideological arguments about communism were not just debates between superpowers but also within localized groups of people such as the men in Brigade 2506.

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